



Figure 1. Ancient Murrelet at mouth of the Genesee River, Rochester, New York, 4 November 1994. Photograph by Robert Marcotte.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES 63: ANCIENT MURRELET

ROBERT MARCOTTE

The morning of 31 October 1994, dead calm on Lake Ontario in a lingering warm fall, looked like a dull day for birding as I started the half mile walk out the Charlotte pier at the mouth of the Genesee River in Rochester. This impression changed abruptly when I spotted a murrelet just off the tip of the Summerville pier on the far side of the river. I began to sketch my impressions, then held my breath as two Coast Guard vessels churned by precariously close to the bird. However, it remained unconcerned by either the boats or a fisherman seated at the end of the pier only a few feet away.

Sensing the bird was not leaving immediately, I headed for the nearest pay phone to call Carolyn Cass and to alert the local birding grapevine, then home to pick up camera and field guides, and back to the Summerville pier. Recalling the previous fall's visit to the Moses Saunders power dam pool by a Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*; Boyle *et al.*, 1994), I at first thought this might be another one. Close examination from the end of the Summerville Pier showed this bird was different. The bill was light, there was a pronounced contrast between the dark crown, upper face, and nape and a lighter gray back, and there were no white markings on the scapulars. It was an Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*), a first for New York State! A later search through Harrison (1983) revealed the Crested Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus wumizusume*) from waters off Japan as the only other possible confusing species in winter. However, that species is shown with yellow legs and feet, and this bird's definitely were black.

Through the rest of the day, in spite of a rising chop on the lake and afternoon rains, local birders arrived to study and photograph the bird. It seemed to settle into a pattern of approaching to within a few feet of the end of the pier, frequently diving for small minnows, then drifting out to the northeast with less diving and more resting on the surface, preening, and stretching of raised wings. It would sometimes drift a hundred yards or more out and be lost to view. However, within every 15-20 minute period it would reappear from off the river mouth headed for the pier, again actively diving for 10-20 sec., and often resurfacing for only a few seconds. Behavioral observations included its total unconcern for fishing boats passing close by trailing lines and floats, an apparent aversion for the patchy areas of very muddy, brown water, and an

interesting habit of lying on the water with wings out flat and partially open, with head down, apparently looking for prey much as a Common Loon does. At times when it was diving a bit farther off the pier, Bonaparte's Gulls feeding in the area were seen to harass the murrelet when it popped to the surface. It easily avoided them with quick dives. In the approaching dusk around 4:45 PM, the bird swam out a final time. By that time about fifty birders had added a tick to their New York lists.

Tuesday and Wednesday, 1 and 2 November, brought rain and winds increasing to gale force from the north. Waves washed over the pier, closed to foot traffic. There were no sightings those days.

Thursday morning dawned bright and clear, with southwest winds and a low chop on the lake. In a quick check before work, Bob Spahn spotted a small bird of the right general size and shape a couple of hundred yards out, lit up in hues of orange by the rising sun. Back on lunch hour with Sue Spahn, they learned from fishermen that neither they nor a few visiting birders had found the bird during the morning. Yet, on arriving at the end of the pier, the Spahns observed the bird 50 yards or so away, heading straight for them. This time it was very actively feeding and finally worked its way a hundred yards or so in toward shore along the east side of the pier. In the relatively clear water, it was possible to observe some of its feeding behavior. It was pursuing minnows which would ball up, much like starlings with a hawk present. The murrelet, essentially flying under water, was seen to use its wings to make rapid twists and turns through the balls of minnows. After feeding inward along the pier, the bird would move off 50 yards or so and head back out, spending more time on the surface. While close in, it was so active that catching it on the surface for photos was difficult, but a half roll of film was shot by Spahn.

Again the word was passed and a few more birders were able to observe the bird through the afternoon. By this time more mud and debris were issuing from the river mouth. The next group arriving did not immediately find the bird, but observed it flying in from beyond the brown waters to again take up the feeding loop along the east side of the pier, now feeding nearly in to shore at times. The bird departed just before 4:00 PM after only another ten or so observers having viewed it.

On Friday, 4 November, the bird was present when the first observer arrived around 6:30 AM and put on quite a show for the many observers arriving from near and far. It followed the pattern of the previous day. The birders became a part of the show, surging up and down the pier, trying to get in position for good views or closeup photographs when the bird would pop up. Some of the fishermen were quite entertained by

the antics of both the bird, which some fishermen now called the "Ancient Mariner," and the birders. At times, photographers could focus by noting minnows leaping from the surface just before the bird would appear, minnow in bill. By early afternoon, the water, even along the pier, was becoming murkier. The bird drifted out of sight into the open lake just after 1:30 PM after being seen by about 50 more observers. The accompanying photograph was taken by the author between noon and 1:30 PM period this day.

On Saturday morning birders from all across the state arrived early, but muddy water surrounded the east pier and a heavy chop covered the lake to the west and out beyond the river's mud plume. The murrelet was not seen. Perhaps the muddy water eliminated its ability to sight prey. The bird was not observed again until presumably the same individual was seen flying past the observers manning a watch for migrating water birds at the Hamlin Beach State Park about 18 miles west of Rochester at 7:30 AM on Tuesday, 8 November. It landed to the west, but could not be located in the rough waters. On Sunday, 13 November, Willie D'Anna relocated presumably the same bird feeding around the piers extending into Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Welland Canal near St. Catherine's, Ontario, about 85 miles west of Rochester and 8 miles west of the mouth of the Niagara River. This provides a first record of a live bird for Ontario and a first there since a bird was found dead on the north shore of Lake Erie on 15 November, 1908 (Godfrey 1966:201). As many as another 100 birders were able to view the bird that day.

The Ancient Murrelet is generally a bird of the North Pacific, breeding in North America from the Aleutian Islands to southern British Columbia and casually to Carroll Island, Washington. It winters from the breeding grounds and coastal Alaska to small numbers along the central and even southern California and Baja coasts, often far at sea (AOU 1983:245). There have now been sightings from 22 states, seven of these east of the Mississippi, and six Canadian provinces, two of these eastern (White 1990). Only two reports have been from farther east than this current sighting, a 13 April 1913 record from Montreal (Godfrey 1966:201) and a 29 November 1992 flyby at Rockport, Mass. (Ellison and Martin 1993). The observations of this bird chasing and eating minnows seems to be a departure from their normal diet of marine invertebrates (Bent 1963:138).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Robert Spahn for his contributions of personal observations on the murrelet's behavior, research of the historical information, and review of the manuscript.

4533 Dewey Avenue, Rochester, New York 14612

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